

The Man in the Stone House

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was capable of loving you yesterday. I'm a new man, Louise. It wasn't that I was a fool; it's that I was a self-satisfied fool. Perhaps you don't see what I mean. I don't know as I see clearly myself. I know there's something new and determined inside here, and I feel different. I can love now, Louise. I know what it is—it's different than it was—and I'm big enough to—let you go."

"Let me go?" she repeated dully.

"Let you go—yes. I'm going to start all over again. My store's going to be sold at auction. It won't bring what I owe, at a forced sale, but I can pretty nearly make it up. It'll take everything. Then I'm going to work. And I'm not going to leave town, either. I'm going to stay here and take my medicine. I think Joel Tibb will give me a job. He was saying last week he needed a delivery clerk. Well, that's what I mean by letting you go, Lou. I mean I want you to be free."

"Oh, this is all crazy—crazy!" she cried. "You can't do anything like that, Walter. There must be some way out. But if there isn't—"

"Yes?" he asked breathlessly.

"I'll marry you next year, and live anywhere, if we have to. I mean it."

She came to him now, put her face close to his. He let his lips brush against her cheek, and then jumped up.

"No," he said; "that's the sort of thing I might have done yesterday. But I'm a new man, Lou. It wouldn't do at all—we know it wouldn't, and there's no use in deceiving ourselves. Particularly there's no use in my dragging you down with me. You know what your father would say. What's the use, Lou?"

"You don't care enough for me," was her sweetly reasonable reply. "You don't. I know what you'll say; but you don't—you don't. If you did you couldn't talk that way. You couldn't be—couldn't be—sensible."

He laughed at that, but it was a laugh tinged with bitterness.

"I'm not going to be charged with having too much sense," he told her quietly—"not when I get back to the village."

THE mare, hearing Eadbrook's laugh, had raised her head from the brush at the side of the road, and whinnied. It reminded Eadbrook that the time was passing. He glanced at the girl beside him. She was standing, with her hands clasped, looking down. He had the impulse to take her in his arms, and he obeyed it. He held her tightly—more tightly than there was need, for she was clinging to him like a frightened child.

"Do as I say," he told her. "Go back to the village now. I'll come along later. You might, if there was some way you could, get word to Starr that I'll see him this afternoon—or as soon as I get there. We can talk about—the other things—later. Good-by."

She did not move. She looked up into Eadbrook's face, and there was something now shining in her eyes. "Go on! Go on," she murmured. "You never used to talk to me like that. You have changed, Walter; and I love it. Tell me something to do; give me orders, dear. Speak in just that tone you did then. I came out here to help you. But oh, how glad I am you've got to help me! What shall I do? Tell me!"

He held her out at arm's length a moment, turned her around, and walked up the road toward the horse.

"I want you to go back," he said, with a wan smile. "That's all now."

"You have changed—you have!" she whispered. "It's wonderful."

"Good-by," he said.

She looked at him wistfully a moment. He helped her to her seat, pressed her hand, and she was gone.

Eadbrook thrust his hands in his pockets and went back to get his hat.

"Changed!" he repeated grimly. "Changed! I'm afraid it came a little late."

JOEL TIBB was whisking back and forth in Starr's room at the Commercial Hotel, like a trapped squirrel.

At every turn he was wringing his hands and saying: "What ye going to do? What ye going to do? We got to do something. What ye going to do?"

"Sit down and take it easier, Joel," replied Starr, for the tenth time. "You're getting in a bad state. Sit down."

Joel sat down, remained seated for half a minute, then bobbed up again.

"I can't sit down!" he cried. "How's anybody going to sit down, with things this way? Oh, this'll be nuts for Ezra. I can see him up there, rubbing his hands and cackling—"

"You're thinking too much about Ezra," warned Starr. "Fact, I wouldn't wonder if that's been the trouble with all of us, all along. Thinking too much about Ezra, I mean. There's no use getting excited, Joel. It's done. And we don't know but it'll be all right yet. If Eadbrook does what he says he'll do—and he can't very well get away from it—the Association will come out whole. Poor Eadbrook! I can't get it through my head why he drew that money—"

"Well," said Joel bitterly, "you haven't heard the way the merchants are talking about it. They're all ready to throw up the sponge. Dud Gillette is flying around hollering 'I told ye so' in everybody's ear. The boost has busted."

AFTER Joel was gone, there came a knock at the door.

"Lady to see you, Mr. Starr," said the boy. "Here's her card."

Starr glanced at the name:

Miss Katherine Burbridge.

"In the parlor?" asked Starr. "All right; I'll be right down."

"I hope you'll forgive me for bothering you, Mr. Starr," began Katherine, when Starr entered the parlor. "But I couldn't go to any one but you. I want to ask you about Walter."

"Well, it's simple enough, so far as Eadbrook is concerned," the man replied. "The poor fellow, for some reason or other, withdrew the Association's money from the Eastfield National Bank and put it in his safe. One of the fakirs that was here last week, who seems to have been a sort of cracksman in addition to being a showman, got wind of it—and the rest of the story is in plain sight down at Eadbrook's store. The safe was blown last night. How they knew he had the money is something we're trying to find out. The constable says he was around the Square during the night, and didn't see anything. It was clever work—some old hand at the business, no doubt. And there you are."

"Naturally it's going to make things hard for—your work," she said thoughtfully.

"You're right. Things are breaking badly, as it is. Several of the men have fallen out of line, and the rest of the merchants are up in the air. But I'm going to stick. This town's going to be boosted, if there's any boost in it."

She looked at him curiously.

"If there's any boost in it," she repeated.

Starr caught the expression. He came over and sat down beside her.

"You know a lot about this town and the people," he said to her earnestly. "I wish I knew you well enough to—well, to be able to talk frankly."

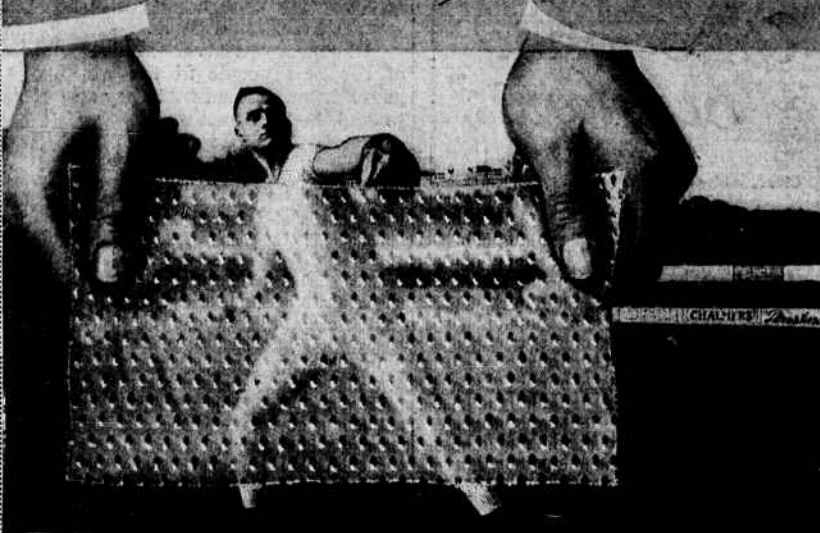
"Please do," she replied quickly. "Please let me talk frankly with you, Mr. Starr. I've wanted to tell you how much I admired your pluck and your cleverness, and how sorry I am—"

For the first time since he had been in Boxton, Starr felt uncomfortable on his own account.

"Yes?" he interjected nervously. "Sorry for what, Miss Burbridge?"

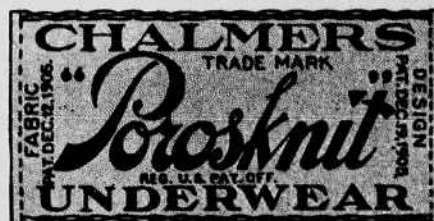
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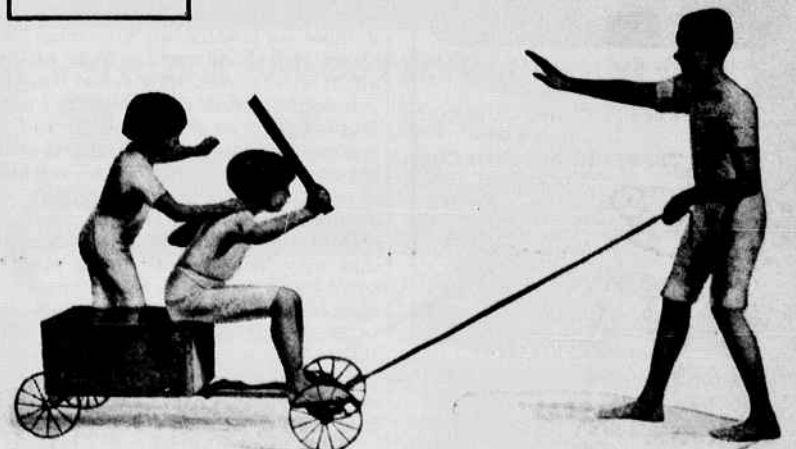
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